

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* as Generator of Differing Feminist Traditions

Chantal Cornut-Gentile d'Arcy

Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Universidad de Zaragoza

Abstract

Although the name of Mary Wollstonecraft still stands high in the annals of feminism as one of the earliest promoters of the feminist ideal of human equal rights, a closer look at the development of feminism along the nineteenth century reveals that *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* did not influence solely the movement for the emancipation of women or Equal Rights Movement (too often presented as the only existing type of feminism at the time). Some of the ideas advanced by the author in her famous book were likewise appropriated by another type of feminism which upheld women's DIFFERENCE from man rather than their similarity. The purpose of this article is therefore to analyze how and why Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* can be considered as having given rise to two different and indeed, sometimes contradictory approaches to feminism.

Key words: Wollstonecraft, Generator, Differing trends of feminism.

«Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?»
«That depends a good deal on where you want to get to», said the Cat.
«I don't much care where» —said Alice.
«Then it doesn't matter much which way you go», said the Cat.
«So long as I get SOMEWHERE», Alice added as an explanation.
«Oh, you're sure to do that», said the Cat, «if only you walk long enough».
(Carroll, 1972, 88-9)

Maira Gatens uses this quotation as an allegorical description of the arguments she then puts forward concerning the relation between feminists and philosophy (Gunew, 1991:181-198). One of the approaches she presents is that, as a discipline or method of inquiry, philosophy has invariably been male dominated, but that women have always had it in their power to correct this bias by filling the «gaps» in political, moral and social theory, thus converting, «a male-dominated enterprise into a HUMAN enterprise» (Gunew, 1991:184).

As is well known, the most significant innovative theme in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was the author's adamant opposition to the idea of women's subordination as something inevitable and natural, and her claim for equality and natural rights for women. This, in itself, was not an entirely novel idea but the date and circumstances of the book's publication gave a new political weight to the title. From then on, changes in the intellectual life of the period made it easier to argue seriously for women's rationality (Browne, 1987: 1-29). By extending the language of Enlightenment to women, Mary Wollstonecraft did not use philosophy as a mere «descriptive» tool, she made of it a transformative activity capable, not only of analyzing social relations but also of providing a means whereby those relations might be altered. Mary Wollstonecraft's work therefore ensured that women, from then on, might «get SOMEWHERE», as Alice explained to the cat. For this reason, the author's achievement has invariably been considered as an important milestone in the kind of research which K. Ruthven terms «diachronic literary feminism» (Ruthven, 1988: 17). However, it is also a well known fact that many of Mary Wollstonecraft's arguments concerning women's place in society were most conventional since she also emphatically acknowledged the inferiority of eighteenth-century women. Consequently, in Mary Jacobus's opinion, the author's work can also be viewed as alienating and even repressive of the female self (Jacobus, 1979: 10). These disparate appraisals of Mary Wollstonecraft's achievement emanate from different principles that have invariably existed within the feminist movement, and which continue to operate even to this day. It will therefore be necessary to analyze the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's main ideas in the historical process of women's emancipation —itself representing, another, and no less important, facet of feminism.

In spite of the large volume of writing in what has come to be called women's studies, feminism as a social movement has apparently been of less interest than the documentation of and explanation for women's continuing inequality. Even those studies that attempt to set feminism in a historical context are characterised by a narrow approach to the subject. In other words, they usually present feminism as a single movement, let alone a single ideology, invariably deriving from such causes as structural changes in society, the separation of home from work, variations in demographic patterns, the preponderance of the middle-class women and surplus women.

For the purpose of this essay, two intellectual traditions of feminism will be distinguished¹, each taking its origin in the eighteenth century and more

1. In her most interesting study *Faces of Feminism* (1990, Oxford: Basil Blackwell), Olive Banks distinguished three different feminist traditions. This paper briefly summarizes and reinterprets some of the author's points concerning two of these traditions and links them to ideas forwarded by Mary Wollstonecraft in her famous pamphlet.

particularly in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft. Hopefully, it will be demonstrated that this common source then gave rise to different and indeed sometimes contradictory approaches to feminism.

The best known of the two traditions is that of the Enlightenment philosophers. Within the feminist movement this tradition has constantly emphasized the potential similarities between the sexes, rather than their differences. Hence, the type of feminism this tradition gave rise to has invariably been spurred on by the conviction that «there is no sex in souls» (to use a contemporary cliché), and consequently, that women's equal rationality entitles them to more control over their own lives. In other words, women, like slaves and other oppressed groups, are seen as excluded from their natural rights and, for this reason, the focal point of the movement has consistently been an end to male privilege.

A friend of many of the important radical intellectuals of the day, including men like Paine, Priestley and Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft was well grounded in this tradition and had already written a defense of the rights of man before moving on to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In this book, she upheld that REASON, rather than custom, hereditary honours and property, was the sole mover of society. She saw a clear relationship between the oppression of the poor and existing property relations. In her opinion, it was very easy to idealize—a roundabout way of despising—the «natural» ignorance of the rustic poor and therefore to deny them the possibility of exercising their understanding. Just as the poor were forced into servility and to unquestioned submission to authority, so were women denied the powers of rationality. They were brought up to be passive beings whose sole aim in life was to «inspire love». Their legal, economic and educational disabilities not only made them wholly dependent on men (Wollstonecraft, 1977:74-5) but also exposed them, when their short-lived bloom of beauty was over, to downright scorn.

I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love (...) will soon become objects of contempt (ibid.: 5).

To account for, and excuse the tyranny of man, many ingenious arguments were brought forward to convince women that the two sexes had completely different aims in life. Men availed themselves of a pseudo-logic to persuade them that meekness, submissiveness and resignation of all individual will were essential qualities for them to be sexually attractive. Such fallacies were used to prevent women from gaining sufficient strength of mind to acquire reason or develop any kind of sense and faculty.

Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and

sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark (Butler, 1989:77)

Once and again the author claimed that women should be allowed to decide what their interest was instead of being continually subjugated. She was convinced that Society would gain a great deal, and Progress would be made more effective if women were able «to pursue more extensive plans of usefulness and independence» (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 161).

The most radical idea advanced by Mary Wollstonecraft was her discreet hint concerning the possibility of parliamentary representation for women (which she made extensive to the labouring classes). She concludes her point by angrily asserting that «despotism will exist whenever the oppressed classes are arbitrarily governed without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government» (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 161).

This new outlook on society began to be a real force in English thought many years before it succeeded in altering legislation, and the fact that, in the nineteenth century, the position of women came to be among the things in dire need of change must be directly attributed to John Stuart Mill. It was his weight and authority that gave a new dignity and solidity to the feminist idea. In his *Representative Government*, published in 1861, he clearly advocated Woman Suffrage. Every argument by which he supported representative government applied, he said, with equal force to the inclusion of women; and every principle of justice demanded that this fact should be admitted (Strachey, 1928:69). In the same year that this book appeared, John Stuart Mill wrote another which he entitled *The Subjection of Women*. The book, however, was not to be published for another eight years, and it was during this eight-year interval that the Woman Suffrage Movement came into formal existence, and Mill himself brought the subject forward in the House of Commons in 1866 when he introduced the first bill for the enfranchisement of women. Though it was defeated by 196 votes to 73, he ensured that from then on, «the Woman Question» was always before the House (Dennis & Skilton, 1987: 15).

Mill took the ground that Mary Wollstonecraft had taken before him in denouncing the enforced subordination of women. Since men demand of women more than simple obedience «they put everything into practice to enslave their minds» (Mill, 1977: 232). Consequently, women are brought up to believe that their aim in life is not self-will and independence, but submission and abnegation. He draws a direct analogy between the power of the husband and that of the despotic ruler or slave-owner (ibid., 219-245), thus directly echoing Mary Wollstonecraft's words: «Let not men in the pride of power, use the same arguments that tyrannic kings and venal ministers have used, and fallaciously assert that women ought to be subjected because she has always been so» (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 50). By presenting the female struggle for independence as a continuation of the fight of the people to free themselves of the rule of the tyrant, Mill places the rights of women as part of a universal

process in which the rule of force should be replaced by the rule of reason. In this book, Mill ponders over the implications and the results of the subjection of a whole sex:

I think that almost everyone, in the existing state of opinion in politics and political economy, would admit the injustice of excluding one half of the human race from the greater number of lucrative occupations, and from almost all high social functions; ordaining from their birth either that they are not, and cannot by any possibility become, fit for employments which are legally open to the stupidest and basest of the other sex (...) Is this not enough, and much more than enough, to make it a tyranny to them (women), and a detriment to society, that they should not be allowed to compete with men for the exercise of these functions? (Mill, 1977: 266).

The logic and authority used by John Stuart Mill to formulate his bid for formal equality created the context which then characterised the women's equal rights movement. Over the years, this movement brought about legal changes in property rights; it brought down legal and institutional barriers that kept women out of certain roles and organisations; it won the vote for women and the possibility, if not the reality, of political power; it made discrimination illegal; it legislated for equal pay. It is not surprising, therefore, if equal rights has sometimes been equated with feminism itself since each consecutive victory has had some part to play in effectively breaking down male privilege and opening the way for greater equality for women.

The second tradition that can be discerned in the history of feminism is that of Evangelical Christianity which surfaced as part of the religious revival that swept over Britain and the United States in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century². Primarily missionary in intent, the initial religious fervour developed into a philanthropic movement as it became more and more concerned with social issues, of which perhaps the most significant were education and the campaign against slavery. At first sight, the religious revival did not seem a very promising ground for the emergence of feminism, since Protestantism did not challenge the accepted view of women as subordinate to their husbands. Moreover, the Protestant emphasis on the family and domestic virtues was to become an essential ingredient in Victorian anti-feminism and the doctrine that women's place was at home (Hamilton, 1978: 57-75). Yet, in spite of this, the evangelical movement was to be a significant factor in

2. Evangelicalism aimed at doing within the Church what the Methodists (followers of John Wesley) were doing outside it. Hence, the main concern of this religious group was the care of the masses and emphasis was laid on motivating simplicity of life and worship in the people. Personal religion, conversion and biblical faith were stressed in this movement rather than the sacraments and the traditions of the Church. This is why the sect is also referred to as «low church», because of the «low» place given to the importance of church government, the sacraments and liturgical worship.

the development of feminist consciousness especially when linked to ideas originally put forward by Mary Wollstonecraft.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft complained that women were brought up to be «innocent» —the equivalent, in her opinion, of being silly, frivolous and ignorant. She therefore insisted that:

To render women truly useful members of society, I argue that they should be led, by having their understanding cultivated on a large scale, to acquire a rational affection for their country, founded on knowledge (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 212).

It seems that activity within the confines of religion provided «safe ground» for women to acquire knowledge of their country. Middle-class women, whose idle lives were rendered more futile by the increase in leisure time with the separation of home and work, turned to religion and charitable activities as a way of filling up empty time with purposeful activities. The seriousness of purpose of the evangelical movement gave it a strong moral emphasis, so that the drive to save souls was usually accompanied with an endeavour to stamp out sin. It was this blend of religious enthusiasm and moral indignation, together with the craving for some useful occupation, that led many women to become increasingly involved in issues of moral and, later, social reform.

The women who lived under the influence of the movement saw that the world was unsatisfactory in many ways: that black people were treated as slaves, that people were poor and hungry, that children were wild and ragged; that drink was hostile to the family and home, especially when drunkenness could bring a family into poverty or lead to actual physical abuse; that prostitution was the result of a double standard of sexual morality. Thus, activity within the religious movement enabled women to gradually acquire, in Mary Wollstonecraft's words:

A Knowledge (...) of the futility of life, (which), if obtained by experience, is very useful, because it is natural; but when a frail being is shown the follies and vices of man (...) surely it is not speaking harshly to call it the wisdom of this world, contrasted with the nobler fruit of piety and experience (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 118-119).

However, these women soon realized that they themselves, being «only women», were often powerless to do any substantial good. And from that illumination sprang evangelical feminism.

Important links were first established between the evangelical movement and feminism in the anti-slavery campaign. The campaign was primarily motivated by disgust at the moral evils of slavery³. In England, the role of women in

3. A disgust that, at least in the United States, included a strong feminist slant in the sexual bias of the campaign: the fact that white men could indulge their sexual needs without disgrace

the anti-slavery movement did not go beyond fund raising. However, this activity accustomed women to participate, even if in a subordinate role, in a political campaign. Their enthusiasm for what they saw as a supremely moral cause gave women at least the courage to break out of what they had been taught to regard as their proper sphere.

The field of temperance was another area, evangelical in inspiration, that was to be of great significance for feminism. Both drunkenness and sexual immorality were defined as moral weaknesses which, in a typical evangelical striving for perfectibility, women sought to help defaulters to overcome. Because drunkenness weakens judgement and will, it was seen not simply as analogous to sexual immorality but one of its major causes. Hence, alcohol was also regarded as a cause for prostitution, since drinking places were «masculine preserves» and often the haunt of prostitutes. Although, in England, there were early examples of female involvement in work with prostitutes, these initiatives were usually wholly religious, their aim being mainly the reclamation of the individual. It was Josephine Butler's campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1870s that linked concern for the prostitutes to feminist arguments about the relationship between men and women in society (Strachey, 1928: 187-189).

The demand for an end to the double standard of sexual morality was, in one respect, no more than an aspect of the claim for equality of treatment that, as has been stated before, represented another intellectual tradition on which feminism was based. What is unusual is that, for most evangelical feminists, an end of the double standard of sexual morality did not mean, as for the equal rights feminists, the opening up to women of opportunities already available to men. Rather, it demanded from men the sexual repression that nineteenth-century morality demanded of women. It cannot, therefore, be understood as a simple expression of equal rights, but rather as an aspect of evangelicalism that upheld the domestic virtues and the importance of family life⁴.

The feminist slant was added to the campaign as a result of the blatant injustice of legally providing a «licence to sin» for men at the cost of women. Josephine Baker's argument against the Acts - that «It is unjust to punish the sex who are the victims of a vice, and leave unpunished the sex who are the main cause, both of the vice, and its dreaded consequences» (Banks, 1964: 111), expresses the general feeling among evangelical feminists. And for this reason, they wished to see seduction punished by prison. On this point too, therefore,

by exploiting their female slaves, and that vice was then made profitable, since it produced fresh slaves for the market (Banks, 1987: 20).

4. Particularly within the middle classes, which deplored alike the moral libertinism of the aristocracy and the vices of the lower classes. In 1802, the Evangelical William Wilberforce founded The Society for the Suppression of Vice which attempted to suppress Sabbath breaking, blasphemous and licentious books, theatres, dancing, fairs, brothels and gaming houses. Of these goals, however, the only immediately successful was Sunday observance (Brown, 1961: 429-430).

the religious tradition links up to opinions already forwarded by Mary Wollstonecraft concerning promiscuousness.

The two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other (...) Chastity, modesty and all the noble train of virtues, on which social virtue and happiness are built, should be understood and cultivated by ALL mankind, or they will be cultivated to little effect. (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 153)

She proposed that men should be made responsible for seduction by, for example, being forced to maintain the women they had seduced, while she advocated rehabilitation of the victims by turning their attention to the real virtue of chastity (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 152-153). Thus, it seems that much of the social activity of the evangelical group, invariably tainted with religious earnestness in their efforts to reclaim people to the Christian fold (or, in more prosaic terms, to middle-class values), were based on precepts already laid down by Mary Wollstonecraft many years earlier.

However, in no field is Mary Wollstonecraft's influence as progenitor of the differing feminist traditions more evident than in Education. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she angrily asserted:

Women have been allowed to remain in ignorance, and slavish dependence, many, very many years, and still we hear of nothing but their fondness of pleasure and sway, their preference of rakes and soldiers, their childish attachment to toys, and the vanity that makes them value accomplishments more than virtues. (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 184)

She then proposed that England should take example from France in breaking the bounds of tradition and trying what effect REASON would have in allowing women to share the advantages of education and government with men (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 185). No improvement of society could come about if women were not permitted to «found their virtue on knowledge», and this could only happen if «they be educated by the same pursuits as men» (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 192). Thus, Mary Wollstonecraft framed her plea for a better education for girls within the context of natural rights. Her arguments in favour of equal opportunity were then taken up by the equal rights movement in their struggle to enlarge employment opportunities for women. However, a necessary prerequisite to this was, logically enough, the improvement of the educational qualifications of those seeking employment. In 1859, a group of women got together and founded a Society for Promoting the Employment of Women. The new Society was inspired by an article by Harriet Martineau published in the *Edinburgh Review* in the same year (Stenton, 1957: 342). Like Mary Wollstonecraft before her, Harriet Martineau believed firmly in the need to educate girls to their fullest capacities and her writings returned again and again to this theme (Stenton, 1957: 338-343). The Society for Promoting the Employment of Women was fundamental in the extension of equal opportunities for women. Not only did it operate an employment

exchange, it also set in motion a series of experimental ventures to place women in hitherto masculine occupations. These included a printing business run exclusively by women, and a law stationer's office. Likewise, the journal edited by the Society played an important part in urging the need for extending employment opportunities for women and in waging a battle with those who tried to maintain a traditional view of women's role (Banks, 1964: 33-34).

Hence, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the steady work of opening careers for women was dependent upon the provision of suitable qualifications, and the necessary educational background. Even that traditional standby, the profession of governess, needed a higher level of education than that usually possessed by those trying to enter it. Added to this was the anxiety caused by the problem of «surplus women». The necessity of providing these women with some means of supporting themselves was a powerful argument used by the feminists⁵ working the field of education. The efforts of the members of the Society, and supporters of their cause redoubled as they realized that their venture for equal work opportunities merged so perfectly into the larger movement for equal rights which, at the time, was campaigning for the enfranchisement of women. Here also, knowledge, education and training were seen as necessary prerequisites to women becoming worthy citizens and voters. Consequently, it may be said that the campaign for State-sponsored education for girls on the same terms as boys, and for the opening up of higher education for women was clearly tending towards the «REVOLUTION in female manners» (Wollstonecraft, 1777: 213) adured by Mary Wollstonecraft.

However, arguments in favour of improvement in the education of girls were not confined exclusively to the equal rights tradition. A conservative Evangelical like Hannah More, for example, believed as strongly in the necessity to revolutionize the system of female education as did Mary Wollstonecraft⁶.

For Hannah More, girls needed an education that would better enable them to fulfil their customary duties as wives and mothers and as guardians of the traditional religious values. The new educational regime she suggested was therefore designed to emphasize women's duties rather than their rights.

There are abundant examples of these views already having been forwarded in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* for Mary Wollstonecraft also claimed that education would make women better companions and mothers. Once and again, she denounced the denigrating position of eighteenth-century

5. The census of 1851 revealed that the population was made up of far more women than men. The problem was exacerbated by the higher rates of male emigration and by a gradual postponement of marriage in the middle classes. Education was therefore seen as the means whereby many of these «surplus women» could find worthwhile employment to support themselves.
6. Hannah More and Mary Wollstonecraft held totally opposed religious and political beliefs, but they were substantially in agreement on female education (Browne, 1987: 173-176).

women and pointed to the vicious circle propagated by mistaken notions of female excellence:

They (women) are still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavour by satire or instruction to improve them. It is acknowledged that they spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments; meanwhile, strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves—the only way women can rise in the world,—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act:—they dress; they paint, and nickname God's creatures.—Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio!—Can they be expected to govern a family with judgment, or take care of the poor babes whom they bring into the world? (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 6).

In her opinion, access to worthwhile knowledge was the only means whereby women could attain «the mental activity so necessary in the maternal character» (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 197) that would then enable them to bring up their children properly. Likewise, she claimed that «if women were led to respect themselves» they would become competent and deserving COMPANIONS for their husbands instead of being mere temporary sexual playthings (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 187).

Hence, the drive for a change in the education of girls came from both an evangelical opposition to frivolity with the movement unintentionally⁷ started by Hannah More, as well as from an Enlightenment concern with human rights and human rationality. Nor, indeed, were the first moves in the campaign that eventually changed the situation wholly feminist in intent. In 1841, the uneasiness caused by the dismal situation of governesses led to the founding of the Governesses' Benevolent Institution, which was largely a philanthropic organization providing financial aid to governesses in distress. As such, it may be considered as one of the charitable endeavours that formed part of the evangelical tradition. The growing conviction that these women would best be helped by improving their qualifications led to the founding of Queen's College for Women (1848) and Bedford College (1849). These institutions provided the necessary impetus to a much wider movement for the establishment of an effective secondary education for girls.

7. Hannah More, Miss Trimmer and the other ladies who started the Sunday School and cottage-visiting fashions can be considered as founders of a movement which, admittedly, would have shocked them profoundly. When Hannah More and her sisters began personally to teach pauper children, they opened up new field of activity for women. It is true that their educational ambitions were extremely limited - their main object being to teach people to be contented with their lot. But even so, the fact that she actually began to teach anything at all was highly revolutionary in itself. Hence, without in the least intending to do so, she was marking out a new sphere for women which, in time, was going to fork out into two movements: the equal rights' revolt against the narrow and futile lives women were forced to lead and the more philanthropic approach of evangelical feminism.

It was in higher education, however, that the main feminist struggle was to be fought out. Although the name of Emily Davies is chiefly associated with her work in the establishment of Girton College at Cambridge (Mc Williams-Tullberg, 1977: 117-146), she was mostly active in campaigning for women to be admitted in Universities. But it is in her determination to resist special examinations for women that Emily Davies must be seen as specifically feminist in her attitude to the education of girls. She feared that special courses for women would be of little use in demonstrating women's ability to compete with men on equal terms. Nor would such courses, in her opinion, be of any use in opening occupations to women. There was therefore outright hostility between herself and another group of women who were prepared to accept different standards for girls. The opposition between the two groups was basically one of tactics. For some women, compromise often seemed the better policy in the beginning, since it took account of the weaknesses in the educational background of women students.

On the other hand, there were many, even within the ranks of the educational reformers, who believed that the education of girls should proceed permanently on different lines from that of boys. The famous Miss Beale, for example, saw the need to raise the standard of girls' education on strictly separatist terms, believing that the spirit of rivalry that common examinations might encourage would endanger «the true woman's ornaments of a meek and quiet spirit» (Banks, 1990: 42). She was therefore poles apart from feminists like Emily Davies who argued for an extension of women's rights. Something of the same ambiguity is revealed in the attitude of Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor and thus, the first to convert into a reality Mary Wollstonecraft's recommendation that «women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses» (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 162). Having earned for herself a place in history as a pioneer, Elizabeth Blackwell's general attitude is surprisingly conservative. She considered that the special contribution women could make to medicine was through their ability to subordinate the self to the welfare of others. In the practice of medicine women would therefore draw on a great essential fact of female nature: their spiritual power of maternity. This largely «moral» feminism nonetheless recalls Mary Wollstonecraft's determination that women should «render their private virtue a public benefit» (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 163), and likewise has much in common with the viewpoint of evangelical feminists. Even so unconventional a character as George Eliot seems to have been under the influence of evangelical feminism in her misgivings about the possible effects of equal educational opportunities for women. She feared that women would become unsexed: «We can no more afford», she wrote,

To part with that exquisite type of gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a women's being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the feminine character, than we can afford to part with (...) human love (Banks, 1964: 47).

This view links in perfectly with Mary Wollstonecraft's idealised notion of a society in which access to knowledge would convert women into charming and intelligent lovers and mothers (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 142-143).

Hence, it seems that most of the arguments forwarded in the great debate over the education of girls during the nineteenth century—that women should be better educated, able to bring up their children rationally, fit companions for their husbands but capable of earning a living if necessary—had already been advanced in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, Mary Wollstonecraft's initial criticisms of female frivolity and uselessness also gave rise to different and sometimes opposed views of women's place in society, thus rendering the movement for the better education of girls a highly complex one, involving as it did both an evangelical emphasis on the preparation of women for their moral duties as wives and mothers, and an equal rights claim for equal opportunities for women in terms both of their right to intellectual development and of their need for better employment opportunities.

However, once the transference of women's work from the home to the work place had become a reality, the equal rights tradition was not the only movement to wield its influence. In other words, the interplay between the two traditions can also be traced in the field of labour. As women workers gradually filled posts in the labour market, they were increasingly seen as rivals who, by usually accepting lower wages, reduced a man's ability to support his family. This, more than anything, underlies both the relationship between women and the trade union movement, and the different stances adopted by the two feminist traditions. Women like Emma Paterson, for example, tried not only to encourage the formation of women's trade unions but to change the attitude of TUC to the place of women in industry. She opposed any form of protective legislation for women on the grounds that such legislation narrowed the range of available jobs for women and restricted their opportunities for competition with men. While this attitude was perfectly consistent with the equal rights tradition of feminism, protective legislation was likewise an attractive proposition to many feminists, whose humanitarian concern for the plight of women was more important than their commitment to the principle of equal rights. The main thrust of protectionism took the form of setting limits on working hours for women and prohibiting night work. It thus reflects the evangelical viewpoint regarding the protection of the weak and the family ideal: women needed protection because of their physical structure and because of their maternal duties. On the whole, trade unions became increasingly committed to the idea of protective legislation, and this was the position after the 1914-1918 war, not only of the trade unions but also of the Labour Party, which continued unaltered right up to this day, when protection for women workers has come under the attack of the modern feminist movement (Lewenka: 1977). So the policy adopted over all these years actually reinforced the view of women as naturally unequal in any competition with men and indeed stressed their dependency, which was seen as natural and inevitable rather than as an aspect of social conditioning or male dominance.

The nexus of such a development can, yet again, be found in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where the social hopes expressed in the author's plea for equal rights are evidently disturbed by gender. How can full equality of rights be reached if the premises laid down are: that women's «apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength must render them in some degree dependent on men in the various relations of life» (Wollstonecraft, 1977: 7)?

Although Janet Todd, in her *Feminist Literary History*, explains that within certain enterprises of feminist criticism, the pursuit of social change is seen as yet another expression, on the part of women, of the desire for dominance (Todd, 1991:15), the issue of protectionism may also be interpreted as a logical consequence of the inherent paternalism in evangelical thinking. Viewed from such a perspective, the demand for traditional feminist goals like suffrage and higher education became not an expression of abstract equality but a way in which women could protect not only themselves as an oppressed group but also their weaker sisters. As such, it also explains the continuing influence of evangelical feminism in the post-war «welfare feminism», with its emphasis on welfare services for mothers and children (birth control facilities, maternity grants, medical treatment, dental care, school meals).

This is why, at the turn of the century, suffrage was so important to the feminists. It represented both the right to have one's voice heard and one's vote counted, and the possibility of applying political power in the service of any cause that women wished to make their own. It was this that gave the suffrage its strength and converted it from a radical equal rights group to a mass movement. It united almost all the feminists into a single campaign and disguised the differences between them. However, the mass appeal of the suffrage campaign, which spread the conviction of women's rights and women's wrongs to all sections of society, did not survive the victory. Especially after 1928, it seems that the feminists who anticipated the vote with such high expectations, then, suddenly, vanished from the stage⁸. Thus, feminism, as a powerful movement was not destined to reappear until the new movement of the 1960s.

The distinctive identity of the «Women's Lib» is reflected in the new vocabulary adopted—turning as it did—from discrimination to oppression and from equality to liberation. Ideologically, this new feminism had no single doctrine and no simple set of goals or aims. Indeed, one of its outstanding features was probably its respect for spontaneity and the subsequent appearance

8. Basically, the attempt to relate the development of feminism after the suffrage victory is hampered by a problem of sources. The traditional vision of feminism as a single movement (and ideology) has led chroniclers and historians to view the suffrage victory as final. In other words, since feminism reached its main goal in 1928, it seemed unnecessary to explore in detail the subsequent developments in feminist organizations. Strachey, for example, devotes only six very vague pages to the 1920s (1928:379-385), while the conclusion in Richard Evans's book, *The Feminists*, refers only to the post World-War I «collapse» of feminist movements (1980: 274-80).

of numerous groups and associations, each advocating its own ideology and strategy. On the whole, however, the unifying link in the movement has been the opposition to patriarchy or women's oppression by man—a concept that, in its implications, is far wider and more radical than the aims of the historic feminist traditions delineated above. Much of the energy of the feminists, and especially of the feminist intellectuals, has therefore gone not simply into action, or even propaganda, but into a search for the SOURCE of man's power over women. A broad view of developments is, here again, neatly summarized by Alice's determination to get «SOMEWHERE»—wherever that might be, since the main lines of division in present-day feminism are to be found in the alternative answers that individuals and groups have provided to this crucial question. The approach referred to by K. Ruthven as «diachronic literary studies» derives from the conviction that women writers have by and large been excluded from literary history and is characterized by the search for, and discovery, of founders of a feminist tradition. Amongst the great writers unearthed, Mary Wollstonecraft was logically assured a place of honour (Moi, 1988:64; Eagleton, 1987:119; Jacobus, 1986: 58).

Consequently, the importance of Mary Wollstonecraft may be viewed from two perspectives. In the first place, if a broad definition of feminism entails the granting of the title of feminist to any person or group that has tried to CHANGE the position of women, or the ideas about women, at any time in history, then, Mary Wollstonecraft's daring move on behalf of women makes of her a feminist par excellence—that is, in her own right, and in her own lifetime. On the other hand, it is also necessary to acknowledge the fact that feminism, as a social phenomenon, in part derived from Mary Wollstonecraft's influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. For this reason, the social and political achievements of the equal rights feminist tradition cannot be properly understood if the movement is not seen as one aspect of the Enlightenment doctrine of natural rights. However, in looking at the development of feminist ideology, the point has also been made that the equal rights tradition was not the sole champion of feminist ideals. Evangelical feminism, with its religious and moral emphasis and its glorification of woman in her maternal role, was an equally powerful influence in motivating women to move out of the home into the public sphere. Likewise, the view of woman in her specifically feminine attributes to reform society may be found in Mary Wollstonecraft's writing. Hence, what is particularly interesting is the fact that these two currents of feminism, deriving as they did from separate origins, representing different goals and holding very disparate images of women and their proper place in society, have relied equally heavily on Mary Wollstonecraft as their founding mother.

References

- BANKS, Olive (1964). *Feminism and family planning in victorian England*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

- BANKS, Olive (1990). *Faces of feminism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- BROWN, F.K. (1961). *Fathers of the victorians: the age of wilberforce*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BROWNE, Alice (1987). *The eighteenth century feminist mind*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- BUTLER, Marilyn (1989). *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the revolution controversy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CARROL, Lewis (1972). *Alice in wonderland. Through the looking-glass*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- DENNIS, Barbara and SKILTON, David (1987). *Reform and intellectual debate in Victorian England*. Beckenham: Croom Helm.
- EAGLETON, Mary (1987). *Feminist literary theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- EVANS, Richard (1980?). *Las feministas. Los movimientos de emancipacion de la mujer en Europa, America y Australasia 1840-1920*. Madrid: Siglo XXI.
- GUNEW, Sneja (1991). *Feminist knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- HAMILTON, R. (1978). *The liberation of women*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- JACOBUS, Mary (1979). «The difference of view» in *Women writing and writing about women*. London: Croom Helm.
- LEWENKA, S. (1977). *Women and trade unions*. London: Ernest Benn.
- MCWILLIAMS-TULLBERG, Rita (1977). «Women and degrees at Cambridge University, 1862-1897» Vicinus, Martha (ed.) *A Widening Sphere*. London: Indiana University Press.
- MOI, Toril (1988). *Sexual textual politics*. London: Routledge.
- MILL, John Stuart (1977). *The subjection of women*. London: Dent.
- RUTHVEN, Kevin (1988). *Feminist literary studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STENTON, D.M. (1957). *The English women in history*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- STRACHEY, Ray (1928). *The cause. A short history of the women's movement in Great Britain*. London: G.Bell and Sons.
- TODD, Janet (1991). *Feminist literary history*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- WOLLSTONECRAFT, Mary (1977). *A vindication of the rights of woman*. London: Dent.